Symbolic gestures: the development terrain of post-tsunami villages in (Southern) Sri Lanka

Hollenbach, P ; Ruwanpura, K N

Abstract: This article analyses how rituals and ceremonies were deployed in the post-tsunami rehabilitation process in Sri Lanka to 'incorporate' development projects into the habitus and social reality of local communities. It argues that even though the aid delivery process is represented as a gift, in reality it is more concerned with strengthening the social capital of the local and foreign donors. Through this process there is an expectation and an implicit demand for acquiescence from the beneficiaries, which leaves them with a social debt. This, in turn, compels them to participate in the game of development rituals and ceremonies, in order to express their (ambivalent) gratitude and thankfulness. Through two case studies, we explore how the good intentions of donors to provide aid and alleviate suffering and the acceptance of this aid by the local communities, results in an asymmetric relationship where both become accomplices of Bourdieuian notions of subtle and gentle violence.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2010.527950

Symbolic Gestures: The Development Terrain of Post-Tsunami Villages in (Southern) Sri Lanka[i]

Abstract: This paper analyses how rituals and ceremonies were deployed in the post-tsunami rehabilitation process in Sri Lanka to 'incorporate' development projects into the *habitus* and social reality of local communities. It argues that even though the aid delivery process is represented as a gift, in reality it is more concerned with strengthening the social capital of the local and foreign donors. Through this process there is an expectation and an implicit demand for acquiescence from the beneficiaries, which leaves them with a social debt. This, in turn, compels them to participate in the game of development rituals and ceremonies, in order to express their (ambivalent) gratitude and thankfulness. Through two case studies, we explore how the good intentions of donors to provide aid and alleviate suffering and the acceptance of this aid by the local communities, results in an asymmetric relationship where both become accomplices of Bourdieun notions of subtle and gentle violence.

1. Introduction

Rituals in Sri Lanka are not uncommon. In a country that proclaims to be steeped in a 2,500 year old history, there is often great fanfare marking particular moments as auspicious, celebratory occasions. From the mundane, for instance shifting to a new abode, to the more propitious occurrences such as marriage, the performance of numerous rites is considered a crucial aspect in the cultural life of Sri Lanka. Even though rituals are largely associated with people's private life, there is no shortage of ways in which ceremonies are drawn upon to legitimise activities in the public world – whether it is for opening a newly constructed hospital or a prize-giving ceremony at school (see also Spencer 2007). Unsurprisingly, development efforts in post-colonial Sri Lanka too have employed ceremonies and rituals. In such cases "'tradition' is copiously invented in state rituals, political speeches, (and) officially sponsored 'revivals'" (Brow, 1988: 316). Given the involvement of the state in development projects in the immediate post-independence years, it became the leading actor in creating, reinventing and advancing traditions to legitimize numerous development practices and projects (Brow 1988;

Tennekoon, 1988). In more recent decades, Sri Lanka has witnessed an explosion of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) making incursions into the world of 'development'. In particular, in the immediate post-tsunami period there was an intense flurry of activity by both NGOs and private philanthropic foundations. Given that these institutions are increasingly the primary vehicles of development practice, a key question is how do they deploy ceremonies and rituals in the Sri Lankan context?

In the immediate post-tsunami phase, the authors became intimately linked to the efforts at reconstruction in two separate villages in southern Sri Lanka. Our association with each village was arrived at through different means. In what we term *E*-village, one of us was an implementing officer for more than two years, and took on management responsibilities for reconstructing a new village. In *L*-village, the other author has strong ties as a close relative is the founder involved in rebuilding the village; it was also a site where previous fieldwork had been undertaken. Because of these unusual connections, we were able to easily gain access to, and hold frank and lengthy discussions with, respondents. These associations also meant that there were numerous opportunities to become participant observers over an extended period of time and record the different phases of a village construction. It was during this time (2005-2008), we had the chance to partake, observe, and even initiate ceremonies and rituals. Given the extensive use of symbols and ceremony as critical markers of achievements, of moving onto another phase, we thought it was important to understand what the use of symbols and ceremonies signalled regarding the reconstruction process in the post-tsunami context.

Existing debates on the post-tsunami Sri Lankan context have explored a range of themes including: the temporality and places of recovery (Ruwanpura, 2009), the multiple dilemmas

and ambiguities embedded in the recovery process (Brun and Lund, 2008; Brun, 2009), the politics of memorialisation and purification (Simpson and de Alwis, 2008; Hasbullah and Korf, 2009), the gendered world of post-tsunami spatial politics (de Mel, 2008; Hyndman, 2008; Ruwanpura, 2008), and the geographies of goodwill (Korf, 2007; Korf et al, 2010). A key theme which underlies these interventions is the impossibility of understanding the reconstruction process without recognising the wider political, cultural, social and cultural terrain of war, ethno-nationalism and uneven development in Sri Lanka. The recurrent failures to grasp the fissures in the country's social fabric means that the *mantra* of 'building back better'[ii] has not really tackled existing fault lines or the continuing tensions in an already fragmented sociality. Our paper extends these debates to look more closely at the symbolic gestures deployed in reconstructing the post-tsunami villages. We argue that these gestures underscore the prevailing modes of social hierarchy.

The literature on the politics of development highlights the importance of how "authoritative interpretations have to be made and sustained socially" and where supporting actors need reasons to become stakeholders in 'interpretive communities' of development (Mosse, 2004:646). As post-tsunami reconstruction efforts shifted from humanitarian relief to development work, a cornerstone of numerous initiatives taken to socially legitimize these activities was that of generous giving. The generosity of the giving state as an imperative of development is well documented, where "inputs are framed as gifts, and they are ritualized accordingly (Li, 1999:314; see also Brow, 1990). Ceremonial idioms highlight the processes of generosity; at the same time, the gift is reified through the mundane visits by state officials, at which people constantly record their gratitude. What the logic of gift then does is to "preclude an alternative framing in terms of rights and entitlements" (Li, 1999:314). The post-tsunami milieu in Sri Lanka presents a situation in which villagers have survived the onslaught of the

tsunami waves noting their good fortune to live, where gratitude – rather than claims to rights and entitlements – is registered for any "gifts" obtained.

We show through our paper that it is not simply the state that invests in the construction of generous giving and evokes tradition through ritual, but so do the private philanthropists and NGOs (Simpson and Corbridge, 2006; Simpson and de Alwis, 2008). As NGOs and private philanthropists participated in post-tsunami development via the process of gift giving, their involvement in creating and participating in ceremonies and rituals became a central plank in legitimising the ways in which they uphold their custom and culture. More critically from a Bourdiean perspective, these ceremonies and rituals are important for deepening the NGO/philanthropists power base by investing in initiatives which enhance the social capital of these individuals and institutions (see also Jeffrey, 2008, 2009).

A corpus of existing literature points to the ways in which Bourdieu's work is deployed by scholars of South Asia to tender perceptive readings of ethnographic material (Thapan and Lardinois, 2006; see also Jeffrey, 2009). These contributions are useful in analyzing the ceremonies deployed in the post-tsunami development context since they show how "symbolic systems (are) efficacious in maintaining relations of domination…in the obscurity of *habitus*" (Jain, 2006:111). Within every field, symbolic forms, struggles and violence are constitutive elements of each symbolic system (Jain, 2006). We show how ceremonies and rituals deployed unravel the ways in which "internalized orientations to action…reflect people's (agents) histories and structure future action" (Jeffrey, 2009:186). These symbolic manifestations are then expressions of the social and material environments where class-power and its representational forms are transferred across multiple communities in seemingly durable forms. Yet even as

some of these rituals are portrayed as vital aspects of Sri Lankan life, Bourdieu (1986, 1990) serves as a critical entry point to show how they are also social practices which convey *habitus* of power, symbols of domination and even gentle violence.

2. A *New* Lease of Life: The Process of Rebuilding Villages

The two institutions under scrutiny here became involved with the reconstruction of villages in the post-tsunami context in different ways. In this section a synopsis of the critical particulars of this involvement relevant for the purposes of this paper is offered.[iii] We show that despite the different trajectories of the organizations involved with rebuilding the villages, both establishments used ceremonies, rituals and symbols as key aspects to their reconstruction efforts.

Research in *L*-village came about through the involvement of a local foundation, which had an active basis of philanthropic work in the community. The tsunami, as unexpected and unfortunate as it was, offered the opportunity for the foundation to become a significant agent in attending to the needs of the neighbourhood. Rebuilding destroyed and partially damaged houses became a significant aspect of the reconstruction efforts put into place by the organization. These efforts had rudimentary beginnings in the immediate post-tsunami context. Although a significant portion of the village was devastated by the tsunami, the local founder did not have the finances to commence a village rebuilding scheme. Financially, the initial rebuilding plans were made possible through the generosity of a network within the Sri Lankan diasporas. It started with building the destroyed residences of the "poorest" members of the community – with a woman who lost her spouse to the tsunami waves being the first recipient.

Over time, however, the local foundation – given its impressive achievements of reconstruction efforts and well established links – moved onto acquire a non-governmental organizational status and struck partnerships with corporate and foreign-donors to embark an ambitious programme of rebuilding smaller compounds of houses within the village. As of today, the foundation has built or renovated some 600 houses in *L*-village. The ceremonies and rituals that went on display in this shifting scene of events moved from the small scale to the large scale, and in the pages to follow we present the ways in which the events came to be performed.

Events unfolded in *E*-village rather differently. Here the rebuilding of the village occurred through a concerted plan of putting in place a new village housing 90 dwellings. The purpose was to relocate villagers from the coastal belt[iv] whom were caught in the tsunami waves, losing their homes and belongings, to a new place inland up to 18km away from their original location. The impetus for building this new village was the coming together of a small group of foreigners who had previous links to Sri Lanka through their work and business. They used their social and political standing in their home countries to raise large-scale funding and started the village rebuilding scheme on a site identified as suitable where the villagers would *"become responsible for their welfare*". The connections of this group of foreigners to politicians and high offices in Sri Lanka also assisted in expediting the work through established processes and protocols. State-level procedures required that donors work together and implement the village construction scheme via registered NGOs already working in the country. The NGO became the executing agency and this meant that it had the task of not simply constructing the dwellings but also had to demonstrate to the donors when particular milestones were met. These clear aims and goals meant that commemorating the achievements of the donors was crucial in indicating the project had been successfully completed.[v] The scale at which the opening ceremony was conducted in *E*-village was thus of a different nature to that of the *L*-village – although opening

ceremonies at the latter stages of the project resonated with that of the one opening ceremony in *E*-village. The next section of the paper describes what constituted these practices and what it aimed to signal regarding the achievements of the institutional actors.

3. Ceremonies and Rituals: A Commemoration of Achievements?

The donor driven scheme had a clearly stated objective of building a specific number of houses. It meant that a sense of finality to the project needed to be registered at some point through the lifetime of the village construction. By the start of 2007, there was increasing emphasis placed on holding a mid-year inauguration ceremony and the planning for it therefore had to get underway. Their thinking was that a ceremony would show the results to the donor country and the respective institutions as the village building was nearing completion. Further delay beyond July 2007 was likely to minimize attention and loose interest in the project, it was thought. Although holding a celebratory launch was being stressed, the village construction process was still not completed and it was facing major problems with the water supply and road construction. Moreover, the 90 families who were identified as eligible for new housing were increasingly unwilling to move into the new village. There was great pressure placed on the NGO to deliver through "participative" meetings with the housing recipients. Consequently, there was much coaxing done by the NGO to get villagers to move to the site while construction was going on. Fifteen families ended-up agreeing to move to the village. Several other recipients were also coaxed to move in temporarily, in order to make the houses look occupied for the inauguration ceremony. The NGO had to demonstrate their accountability but the donors too were under pressure to show responsibility towards their generous friends and supporters. Nevertheless, more than half of the houses remained empty at the inauguration ceremony.[vi]

However, the recipients agreed to participate in preparing for the inauguration ceremony and to help to make the village look attractive on the day.

The ceremony itself was a celebration of the donors' efforts and a staging of their generosity. The donors arrived a day before and took their time to walk through the village with journalists and photographers. They took pictures and gave interviews for the foreign press. They also requested to walk into occupied houses in order that they might "familiarize" themselves with how people live. The recipients more or less voluntarily opened their doors and offered to come in. However, as the implementing NGO had anticipated that the donors would make such a request, four families were approached with this request ahead of time. It was like a show, a well-arranged theatre play. Because the NGO was aware of the "donors visit game", it was important to play it; there was dependency involved as well as the aspiration to get further donations and financial support (see also Li, 1999).

At the opening ceremony the rituals continued. The donors and official invitees arrived at the village and a school choir dressed in *lama-sariya* (white traditional clothing worn by girls attending Sunday school at Buddhist temples) welcomed the guests. The village square became the stage, that was decorated with additional donations gifted to the village – a tractor, a gully bowser, a waste disposal collector wagon – were all on display. A *hewisi* (Oriental/Kandyan) school band, dressed in colourful *lungi* (a long straight cloth and short jacket) and piping Oriental percussion and string instruments, guided the invitees to the first event, the hoisting of the national flags which included the flag of Sri Lanka, the donor country, the donor state, and agencies. Each flagpole demonstrates that the partners are now permanently monumentalized in front of the community hall. The monument, a huge wall made of natural stones, carried the

emblem of each institutional actor and its sponsorship was inscribed. It symbolically demonstrates to the villagers on a daily basis that the place they live in is generously gifted; "it is made for people affected by disaster rather than by them" (Simpson and de Alwis, 2008:7). After the flags were hoisted, the guests of honour were invited to the ribbon cutting ceremony to the community hall and were again guided by a Kandyan-dancing group and the band to their seats. The housing recipients were standing to the aside and watching. Their part in the play was only to watch, a passive form of acting; their contribution to the ceremony was to be present as a thankful audience. However, their children had to dress with shirts, which carried the logo of the NGO involved in the project.

The inauguration lasted almost three hours. With the lighting of the traditional lamp and blessings of religious leaders from different faiths, the ceremony was initiated. Because the village was to represent a 'model' for peaceful living among all ethnic and religious groups, one important element was the representation of all religious groups at the ceremony. *"It is important to bring all the religious groups together, especially now as the country again faces political problems. The village should be a symbol of peace and harmony, and we want to show that people from different religious backgrounds can live with each other"* said one donor. The implementing NGO had to engage in protracted conversations, convincing and negotiating with the religious figures of the temples, church and mosques to accept their invitations. In the end all agreed to attend the ceremony; one convincing fact was a small donation to each religious institution. The Buddhist monks opened the ceremony with prayers and blessings at the astrological auspicious time, which was followed by the Imam and Hindu priest blessing the donors and the village.[vii]

Speeches were given by the donors, the NGO and official representatives from the donor country and Sri Lankan politicians. Alongside, traditional dancing and singing were staged for the guests in order to create a convivial and ritual "Sri Lankan" spirit. The arrangement of the seating was also symbolic. The donors were seated on comfortable chairs in good condition looking on at the receiving families, who were either seated on plastic chairs or standing in the sun due to lack of space. The asymmetric power relations could not have been starker. Even the placement of the stage connoted the thankfulness to the donors. The speeches by the donors were all monotonous. They talked about their solidarity and obligation towards Sri Lanka in this devastating moment of the tsunami disaster and the efforts taken to help raise and finance the village. Each speech emphasized the responsibility the recipients now had in taking over the ownership and management of the village, to sustain good and peaceful living within the community. *"You, the new citizens of the E-village….have to grow together and become a community, a community in the true sense of the word"* said one of the speeches. Ironically, talk of ownership was incorporated at the behest of the donors.

Since the 90 houses comprising the new village were not completed, the key handing over ritual was carried out via one family who represented the villagers. It was an important moment. The four donors handed over a symbolic key,[viii] cut out from cardboard with a huge red ribbon and the name of the village written on it, while paying attention to clicking cameras. The family selected to receive the symbolic key was an exemplar of an active member of the village community. They were always the first to support new ideas and participate in events to show their gratefulness and appreciation; *"we know without the tsunami we never could afford to own property"* said the woman.

4 Marking Milestones via Staggered Rituals

The staging of ceremonies in reconstructing totally and partially damaged houses by the local foundation in *L*-village was, in contrast, staggered. Because there was no stated aspiration by the local foundation to construct and reconstruct 600 houses from the inception, there was no moment of finality. Indeed given the founder's aspiration for a holistic village uplifting scheme, he was aware that *"it is difficult to state that there is an end-point to what I have in mind for the village."* Since the primary goals of the foundation were modest and the preliminary steps were taken through the assistance of individuals, the initial ceremonies were spread out. The rituals of the sort enacted for the *E*-village only occurred afterwards, when institutional donors became players in the rebuilding of sub-villages within the local village.

During May-August 2005 the first batch of rebuilt houses were being 'gifted' to the tsunami-affected recipients. This 'gifting' ceremony consisted of a seemingly minor ritual whereby the donor, in this case Canadians of Sri Lankan origin, cut the ribbon at the entrance of the rebuilt house and they handed the keys[ix] over to the head of the family. Then the family member opened the door and other family members – already inside the house – welcomed the donor with a plate of milk-rice (*kiribath*) and fruit. Alongside the donor family was the founder of the organization, numerous foreign volunteers and friends of the founder, with a photographer taking photos. The family then served all the onlookers and strangers – of which there were quite a few since this was one of the initial houses to be rebuilt and donated – *kiribath* and bananas. All of this was done at the *nakath* (auspicious) time.

It was a sunny day and around mid-morning we had ventured to the house a good few minutes prior to the ribbon-cutting ceremony. The family members were anxious that the founder and the donor family would not arrive on time. Their fears stemmed from the fact the founder and the chief guest was apparently officially donating the keys at another house nearby. Amidst the people who had gathered around the house, it was evident who were the locals and who were the outsiders. During this time through casual conversation with the family our research was explained to them. We inquired if it would be alright if the ritual ceremony was observed and there was no objection.[x] When we spoke about the tsunami and the destruction to property, the family mentioned that they considered themselves to be fortunate to be an early recipient of a reconstructed house. When queried about the layout and we were told that it was a two bedroom house; they suggested that we walk around the house after the chief guest/donor had officially handed over the keys to them. Through our conversation, when it seemed apparent that the family itself was larger than an ideal-type nuclear unit with mother, father and two children, they explained that every house was of a standard size and even though it may be a tight fit for the family they was still grateful for being given a restored house (Hyndman, 2008; Caron, 2009; Ruwanpura, 2009). Their ambivalence about the house, even if for practical concerns, was tempered by appreciation of the 'gift' of a house, similar to the sentiments echoed by recipients in the foreign-built village. The father then showed us around the small garden path and noted how the foundation was offering an incentive for the best kept garden by offering a monthly supply of dry rations and groceries. In the midst of the conversation, the guests and their friends arrived and everyone fell into place – with cordial welcomes and the usual hustle and bustle which facilitated the start of the ceremony.

The ceremony of 'gifting the keys' was also about marking the milestones achieved in reconstructing a tsunami-affected village. It was, in the words of the founder, about

"performance and delivery" – of accomplishing goals. But this rite of passage was also about the numerous unstated structures and symbols that mark the giver and the getter as stemming from rather different social milieus. The tsunami-affected family should now be doubly grateful – for not simply being lucky enough to have survived the tsunami, but also for being a donor beneficiary within six-to-seven months of the tsunami. The bows, the welcome smiles, and the passing around of *kiribath*, fruits and aerated-water drinks was all put on for the donor family, the founder and all other participants. The privilege and status were all unstated markers at this joyous occasion which the founder reflected upon subsequently. These practices are not only symbolic of the habituated status occupied but are also ways of reinforcing people's place in society through 'special' rituals. Serena Tennekoon (1988) reminds us that it is possible to understand that "rituals, whether sacred or secular...are socio-cultural constructs, endowing authority and legitimacy to the positions of particular persons....and structure the way that people think about social life" (1988:294). We pursue this point further by showing that the legitimacy sought and reinforced through ritual practices also inscribe moments of symbolic and gentle violence (Bourdieu, 1977; see also Wilford, 2008).

While the initial house warming and opening ceremonies were spread out, the *L-* village also had inauguration ceremonies for the larger compounds of its sub-villages. The involvement of corporate or foreign donors who facilitated the construction of sub-villages, where each patron built 30 to 85 houses, required such grand events. The construction of these plots had specified time lines attached to them; hence celebrating its completion through rituals and ceremonies was crucial for marking and displaying the milestones achieved to the donors and community. The founder said, *"I have been often asked...what the purpose of these ceremonies is? You know the truth of the matter is that the villagers want these rituals and celebrations; it is a moment for them to come together because for them it is part of their way of doing things,*

something native. It is also for them to see what has been achieved. For us, the foundation, it is to show how we are 'performance oriented, accountable, transparent, and deliver as promised'...which is important for our implementing partners." However, according to a village recipient by the time their sub-village was completed, one of the last, the enthusiasm and need for such ceremonies and rituals were overkill. *"Yes, yes...we had an opening ceremony too. There was quite a bit of tamasha that the Foundation put together because this was the final constructed sub-village – and we got two-storied houses too. We went for the event because it seems to be expected of us, and it makes the people at the foundation happy. To tell the truth, by now (end 2007) we are a little tired of attending so many ceremonies. You will notice there are fewer people who go for these functions these days."* Quite in contrast to the founder's reading of the village recipients "liking" and "wanting" these ceremonies, the villagers had a slightly more jaundiced take on such rituals. But the show was important, in particular for the donors – as the village man said.

The ceremonies usually involved a representative of the donor agency cutting a ribbon and walking around the compound, approving and appreciating the construction and layout of the houses. The recipients watched, standing on the side-lines of a designated house or two; they received the guests of honour by serving *kiribath* (milk-rice), savoury accompaniments and fruits. Ambling in the compound was important for the donor, as they appreciated the layout that resonates with their image of idyllic rural communes located in lush tropical areas with coconut palm trees, green grass and well laid-out shrubbery and gardens. Upon entering P sub-village one comes across small and pretty garden paths with street lighting fashioned after old gas lamps leading into a small and seemingly cosy community of 9-10 houses. V-Gardens are designed with paved/tarred roads and has a children's playground in the midst of 84 two-storied houses, a novelty in any Sri Lankan village. Large or small boards adorn the entrance to

each sub-village complex explicitly denoting its association to the donors, where the benefactor's contribution to uplifting the village through these compounds is recorded. The quality of the housing and the effort put into designing the layouts of each compound is impressive. Yet these built communes and the ritual opening ceremonies signal the interventions of foreign and corporate donors and their claim on these villages. Indeed, it did not seem that the local villages and owners of these new houses had any say, except for the colours used to paint the houses, in redesigning of the village into smaller compounds. Instead, it was the founder – elite and English-speaking – who as the Colombo-based "local" mediator spoke a donor-friendly language and negotiated the funding and reconstruction plans on behalf of the villagers.

5. Power Politics or Celebrations of "Authenticity"

Even though the commemoration efforts of the local foundation and foreign donors gathered pace over time, their occurrence differed, given the distinctive rhythms of each project. Yet in both instances the public display of ceremonies and rituals were important moments for analyzing the ways in which social distance and power relations are stabilized and negotiated. The differences in the ways in which these rituals were enacted in the two rebuilt villages can be explained by the different pathways used to regenerate village communities. This distinction also feeds into the different scales of ritualistic performances of the inauguration days and handing over key ceremonies in the two locations; yet underlying similarities remain and need closer reading.

In both projects donors have a certain interest in requiring rituals and celebrations. As Bourdieu states, "social agents don't do just anything,…they are not foolish….they do not act without

reason" (1998: 75). But is it always a conscious reason or does the *habitus* of the social agent provoke certain reasons? *Habitus* represents the social structures of our subjectiveness, which describes the process of internalisation of outwardness – internalisation of social structures: "The *habitus* fulfils a…socialized body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world…and structures the perception of the world as well as action in the world" (Bourdieu, 1998:81). Therefore action is not only the result of conscious calculus but chosen by the relation between subject and society. The *habitus* relates to a certain social field within the process of internalisation and establishes certain structures by which to think, act and perceive. It is a multidimensional matrix of social reality, constructed through existing practices of society which represents a differentiated social space within which social practices are continuously produced and achieved. Bourdieu (1977, 1990) substitutes the term social field with the metaphor of the game, "Pre-perceptive anticipations, a sort of practical induction based on previous experiences, are not given to a pure subject, a universal transcendental consciousness. They are the fact of the *habitus* as a feel for the game. Having the feel for the game is having the game under the skin" (Bourdieu, 1998:80). These embodied dispositions are apparent in the conversations with the donors and the local philanthropist on the one hand, and the villagers, on the other hand: each busily and skilfully playing its own game.

In the illustrations used in our paper it is clear that one aspect of celebrations and rituals is the legitimization and accountability towards financial and political supporters. The donors at the ceremonies represent the smaller benefactors who contributed to reconstruct and rehabilitate the tsunami affected houses. Results had to be shown to these non-present supporters. As the founder of the L-village stated it is about *"performance and delivery"* or as one of the donors of E-village stated, "*the opening ceremony has to take place in July 2007, afterwards the attention from Germany will be less."* The founder and the foreign donors acted in their social

field of being a receiver of funds and within this field it is important to show results, be accountable, keep the social standing and not loose their credibility. The donation of funds was not only about the physical construction but also about serving their interests and reinforcing their privileged social position. “Strategies aimed at producing practices ‘according to the rules’ are one among other types of officialization strategy, aimed at transmuting ‘egoistic’, private, particular interests into ‘disinterested’, collective, publicly avowable, legitimate interests” (Bourdieu, 1997a:202). It is about the accumulation of their social capital even via episodes of symbolic violence which secures the continuation of the social standing within a social field (Bourdieu, 1998).

The involvement of local politicians and celebrities in the rituals and ceremonies further helped to solidify their existing social ties and connection. Rituals are then used not only to inaugurate development but also to demonstrate political and social presence as the country “modernizes” (see also Spencer, 2007). The *habitus* of donors and givers within the field of aid in Sri Lanka includes the celebration of donation, and through local rituals, the acceptance of development work (Tennakoon, 1988). These rituals help internalize and localize the imposed and external-driven development projects. But this also involves reinforcing local power structures. In the above cases, the local politicians, officials and celebrities were able to re-formalize their social positions within their social field. Participating in a development project funded by foreign agents, having access and personal contacts to this social field of international relations shows superiority and exclusivity; it enhances their social capital and social recognition.

In *E*-village many local politicians from various authorities were involved and the foreign donors used these good social relations in order to achieve project milestones. The external access road

construction, for example, started just one day before the opening ceremony. At this point it was clear that a high-profile minister from Colombo would attend the ceremony and his influence made the local road authority fear sanctions; consequently the road was constructed within a day! Again, this example illustrates how *habitus* and social fields influence actions and strengthen existing power relations, with agents trying to keep their social position and recognition within their social field. In the *L*-village the social position of donors is also demonstrated by inviting Colombo based celebrities to highlight the importance of the tsunami project and its exclusivity. Listening to the initiator of the *L*-Village and the way he explained the need for the inauguration ritual, his *habitus* becomes clear: his relationship with society makes him believe in the need for such a ritual. It is as Bourdieu (1998:98) says "everything occurs as if". The embodied *habitus* demands that the ritual be a natural consequence of constructing a development project. "In such a social universe, the giver knows that his generous act has every chance of being recognized as such (rather than being seen as a naiveté or an absurdity) and of obtaining recognition (in the form of a counter-gift or gratitude) from the beneficiary" (Bourdieu, 1997:233). Or, in other words, "Generosity very often proves to establish a good reputation and to serve our long-term interests. It supplies us with honour and gratitude" (Vandevelde, 2000:2-3). It becomes clear that the game of honour and recognition within ones social field, in this case that post-tsunami rebuilding villages, represents the entrenchment of micro-level political structures even when it comes in the guise of generosity and goodwill.

6. Ambivalent Gratitude

The local founder and the implementing NGO for the foreign donors for *L*-village and *E*-village, respectively, were convinced of the positive deeds enacted by them in rebuilding and regenerating rural communities. Indeed, the rhetoric of 'empowering' communities was

frequently used. The local founder, for instance, said, *"But I personally think if you compare our village to the one neighbouring it, ours is conceded to be a rural community model – the disadvantaged families, rural youth and children are being empowered with facilities that they would not have got even if they came to Colombo*." The ways in which this confident ethos is shared by the villagers in both locales is more ambiguous. Segments of the community in each of the villages appreciate the ways in which their communities have been revived and renewed and how they have become beneficiaries of houses with a minor plot of land. Yet this gratitude has to be counterbalanced with the ways in which villagers were playing the system and appropriating the rhetoric of gratefulness to garner access to resources they would not have had in different circumstances. Their ability to turn the tables and play their role in the donor/philanthropy games are also important illustrations of the ways in which their agency is registered, albeit under constrained conditions. The ambivalence of their gratitude is critical in understanding the ways in which symbolic gestures deployed by those in positions of power are sometimes overrun and inverted by those at the receiving end. Quite in contrast to Bourdieu's emphasis on class reproduction through gaming spaces, which tends to render impotent the capacity of marginalized groups in effecting resistance, what we find is how they engage in practices which play with the system in a manner that is beneficial and critical for their welfare (see also Jeffrey, 2008; 2009).

Juxtaposing motivations for obtaining houses and wanting to participate in the ceremonies and rituals performed in *E*-village highlight the ambiguity at play. One villager mentioned, *"for me the tsunami was the only chance to obtain a legal housing deed. In my situation, working as a seamstress and with my husband as a daily labourer, we could never afford to own a house. I move there, even if it is far away from Galle and it is still very dirty because of the construction taking place."* Here, even though the distance from Galle Road was counter productive to the

economic life of both her and her husband and the village site was noted as being dirty, the promise of receiving a legal housing title was the motivation to move into a village under construction. Another recipient was blunt when she said, *"Madam, we help you to make the donors happy. You have worked hard for us. So we help you to make this a good day and make donors happy."* Here she was echoing the sentiments of some villagers who recognized that they would participate in and undertake these rituals – not because they wanted to but because they were aware that their participation would "make the donors happy". They were acutely aware that without them, the ability of the donors to create a particular type of representational space would be thwarted. The game, therefore, was played when it was deemed to be of benefit to them.

Even though the two housing reconstruction schemes show differences, they have one major aspect in common: the direct involvement of donors in the giving process. This turns generosity around and unfolds its double truth. Tittmus (1971) agues, that the modern altruistic giving has nothing in common with the giving in archaic societies (Mauss, 1924). Therefore modern giving rules out the "the three-fold sequence of obligations (the obligation to give, to accept, and return)" (Silber, 1998:138) and the capacity to create and transform social relations that Mauss ascribes to the archaic gift giving systems. For Tittmus (1971) modern anonymous giving makes this exchange very close to an altruistic gift with no strings attached and no expectation of any return. The Tittmusian modern altruistic gift is certainly not in place in these projects.

Since the writings of Marcel Mauss (1924) and Jacques Derrida (1992) we know that there is no such thing as a "free" gift. Giving always involves reciprocity and even being aware that a gift is given does invalidate the spirit of a "free" gift. Giving binds people together, it creates individual

and social ties; it is motivated by the nature of human relationships (Bourdieu, 1997(a), 1997(b); Douglas, 1990; Komter, 2005). In both projects we see this direct involvement, the strings attached to the gift and reciprocity demanded, even extracted in certain instances. The donors create their own vision of a village, they make decisions about the implementation process, the housing plan, the village design and they pressurize on how aid is delivered. The recipients in return accept to participate in various ceremonies knowing that this is the only way "*to make donors happy*". This exchange illustrates how the giver and receiver stand in relation to each other in their capacity to reciprocate. It also reveals that the universal obligation of reciprocity no longer holds where the social divide is vast and the recipient cannot offer anything in return. Sahlins (1972) suggests this type of reciprocity affirms social hierarchy over time. If generous gifts cannot be reciprocated they leave behind a significant social debt and dependency. Or in other words, "giving is also a way of possessing (a gift which is not matched by counter-gift creates a lasting bond, restricting the debtor's freedom and forcing him to adopt a peaceful, co-operative, prudent attitude)" (Bourdieu, 1977:195).

The depth of this ambivalent feeling of gratitude still binds people together in an asymmetric relation of domination and hierarchy. As Bourdieu states, "one of the ways of 'holding' someone is to keep up a lasting asymmetric relationship such as indebtedness;....because the only recognized, legitimate form of possession is that achieved by dispossessing oneself – i.e. obligation, gratitude, prestige, or personal loyalty" (1977:195). Gratitude therefore serves the interest of one's social position. Furthermore, the accumulation of social capital legitimizes the standing rule of the field – prestige and power – obtained in our cases through forms of symbolic and gentle violence.

7. Conclusion

The proliferation of NGO and private philanthropic giving is presented as a laudable, necessary and charitable act – as it has the potential to unpick the vulnerability of the giver (Clark, 2007). Yet we have shown that this process is legitimized with cultural meaning extended through rituals and practices: the positions of giver and receiver do not merely show the social and power divide, but also the ways in which the "physical world and the human world participate in the construction of meaning" (Wilford, 2008:659). These are often etched through forms of symbolic capital. The involvement of local philanthropists from the English-speaking middle class and foreign donors in these acts of generous charity always entail employing "cultural" practices as a crucial conduit of situated development. However, we have shown that this does not necessitate an alternatively imagined development but rather often becomes about "reproducing and deepening class structures" and positions of power (Bourdieu, 1998; see also Jeffrey, 2008).

Acceptance of these practices, however, results in a Bourdieuian non-violent form of violence being perpetrated through masked acts of generosity. Bourdieu (1977:196) calls this symbolic violence and suggests that it works through the "transfiguration of relations of domination and submission into affective relations, the transfiguration of power into charisma or into the charm suited to evoke affective enchantment" (Bourdieu, 1998:102). This transformation can only work if all agents within the social field have acquired the same *habitus* and do understand the rules of the game. Therefore, "agents lastingly 'bind' each other, (…), only through the dispositions which the group inculcates in them and continuously reinforces, and which render unthinkable practices which would appear as legitimate and even be taken for granted in the disenchanted

economy of 'naked self-interest'" (Bourdieu, 1977:196). Here it becomes clear that through the development of the same *habitus* all actors become accomplices of symbolic and gentle forms of violence. The dominant and the dominated collaborate, knowingly and unknowingly, in a work of dissimulation tending to deny the truth of exchange. This shows the subtle and cowardly form symbolic violence takes and how hard it becomes to escape. To escape, people would need to reflect on their *habitus*, change both the "nature" of their embodied thinking and their acting (dispositions). We find that even where the "beneficiaries" play the game creatively and skilfully, political economic realities keep them in place. It is not that marginalized groups lack the capacity to confront their predicament and be deliberately ambivalent in their gratitude. It is that even though their voices and narratives have shown that they are aware of and use their capacity to subtly and creatively counteract the domination by NGOs and philanthropists, this in and of itself does not transform social structures and power bases. That would require all social agents to accept the intrusion into their field and transform their dispositions.

The cultural practices and rituals in the post-tsunami context then go beyond what Tennekoon (1988) showed to be taking place through the various development projects over nearly two decades. Quotidian cultural practices are no longer used and deployed to generate, reinvent, legitimize and press on the quest for modernization. The destruction caused by the tsunami meant that the urgent need for physical reconstruction was taken for granted while the entrenched positions of power, social standing and authority of foreign donors and local elite actors were legitimised through these rituals. This was visible in the seemingly simple act of gifting the key to new homes: the donors were on one side of handing over the key and the recipient family on the other, smiling and showing their thankfulness and happiness. They were aware that they were part of a game but had to feign their lack of awareness. Here generosity reveals its double truth: it reveals social asymmetry, hierarchy and the manifestation of power.

However, material conditions prevent a stripping away of the inherent tensions in these symbolic gestures where cultural rituals and practices are used to convey the *habitus* of power, the symbols of domination and the episodes of gentle violence.

[i] The corresponding author wishes to acknowledge a grant from the British Association for South Asian Studies (BASAS) with the British Academy, which enabled fieldwork for this paper, and funding from the School of Geography, University of Southampton (Summer Student Bursary), which facilitated the research assistance of Andrew Morgan towards initial analyzing of the qualitative data. We would also like to thank Ed Simpson (SOAS) for his detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper and encouraging us to engage on the topic, Benedikt Korf (University of Zurich) for his input towards the first author, and finally Ariane McCabe (University of Cambridge) and Steven Pinch (University of Southampton) for their patience and generosity in proof reading our paper during its final incarnations. Any shortcomings in this paper, however, remain our own.

[ii] This is the espoused Sri Lankan government policy position on post-tsunami reconstruction efforts.

[iii] Elsewhere a detailed analysis of fieldwork processes is given (xx 2010).

[iv] The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) declared in 2005 a "buffer zone" of 100-300m around the coastal line in order to secure the inhabitants in case of a further Tsunami and people were relocated accordingly (Hyndman, 2008).

[v] "Success" for the donors was measured by completing the physical infrastructure necessary for constructing a village, rather than necessarily how community life will be organized and managed in the new social, political and economic environment. The donors neglected the fact that people are forced to migrate into a new environment and leave behind their habituated social world. The new village is formed out of 13 different villages along the coastal belt, and so social, ethnic and economic structures and relations began anew.

[vi] The majority felt that to move out to Akmeemana division into unfinished housing was worse than their current temporary living conditions, because there was no running water, no roads and access to main roads, food markets and with construction still ongoing.

[vii] This moment of harmony is well recorded with many photos taken by foreign journalists. In a documentary done by a foreign TV production company, this "moment of harmony" is represented as a positive effect the project has achieved in Sri Lanka.

[viii] This was merely symbolic because legal questions on land ownership are still not clarified (2010).

[ix] At this point, the symbolic gesture was to handover the keys and not necessarily the title deeds to the house. In fact in early 2008 during a return visit to the village, some villagers noted that there was some variation in obtaining the legal deeds to their new abodes. Some had obtained the title deeds, especially where the houses were rebuilt within the land premises of their destroyed houses, while others got them after some delay and still others who had not received the title deeds at all – and were unawares as to when they would obtain these.

[x] And in every sense, how could there be – in so far as the researcher was of a different social standing who is unlikely to have been turned down at a joyful event.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of A Theory Of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Bourdieu, P. (1997a) Selection from the Logic of Practice, in: A. D. Schrift (ed.) *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, (New York: Routledge), pp. 190-230.

Bourdieu, P. (1997b) Marginalia – Some Additional Notes on the Gift, in: A. D. Schrift (ed.) *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, (New York: Routledge), pp. 231-244.

Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

Brun, C. and Lund, R. (2008) Making a Home During Crisis: Post-tsunami Recovery in a Context of War, Sri Lanka *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 29(3), pp. 274-287.

Brun, C. (2009) A Geographer's Imperative? Research and Action in the Aftermath of Disaster *Geographical Journal* 175(3), pp.196-207.

Brow, J. (1988) In Pursuit of Hegemony: Representations of Authority and Justice in a Sri Lankan Village *American Ethnologist*, 15(2), pp. 311-327.

Brow, J. (1990) The Incorporation of a Marginal Community within the Sinhalese Nation *Anthropological Quarterly*, 63(1), pp. 7-17.

Caron, C. (2009) A Most Difficult Transition: Negotiating Post-Tsunami Compensation and Resettlement from Positions of Vulnerability, in: N. De Mel, K.N. Ruwanpura, G. Samarasinghe (eds.) *After the Waves: The Impact of the Tsunami on Women in Sri Lanka*, (Colombo: Social Scientist Association), pp. 112-152.

Clark, N. (2007) Living through the tsunami: Vulnerability and Generosity on a Volatile Earth *Geoforum*, 38(6), pp. 1127-1139.

De Mel, N. (2007) Between the War and the Sea: Critical Events, Contiguities and Feminist Work in Sri Lanka *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 9(2), pp. 238-254.

Derrida, J. (1992) *Giving Time 1: Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).

Douglas, M. (1990) Foreword: No free gifts, in: M. Mauss *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge), pp. vii–xxviii.

Hyndman, J. (2008) Feminism, Conflict and Disasters in Post-tsunami Sri Lanka, *Gender, Technology and Development*, 12 (1), pp. 101-121.

Jain, S. (2006) Bourdieu's Theory of the Symbolic: Traditions and Innovations, in; R. Lardinois and M. Thapan (eds) *Reading Pierre Bourdieu in a Dual Context: Essays from India and France* (New Delhi: Routledge), pp. 103-129.

Jeffrey, C. (2009) Fixing Futures: Educated Unemployment through a North Indian Lens *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51(1), pp. 182-211.

Jeffrey, C. (2008) Kicking Away the Ladder: Student Politics and the Making of an Indian Middle Class *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26, pp. 517-536.

Komter, A. E. (2005) *Social Solidarity and the Gift*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Korf, B. (2007) Antinomies of Generosity: Moral Geographies and Post-tsunami Aid in Southeast Asia *Geoforum* 38(2), pp. 366-378.

Korf, B. and S. Hasbullah (2009) Muslim Geographies and The Politics of Purification in Sri Lanka after the 2004 Tsunami *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 30(2), pp. 248-264.

Korf, B. *et al*, (2010) The Gift of Disaster: The Commodification of Good Intentions in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka *Disasters - The Journal of Disaster Studies, Policy and Management* 34(1), pp. 60-77.

Lardinois, R. And Thapan, M. (2006) *Reading Pierre Bourdieu in a Dual Context: Essays from India and France* (New Delhi: Routledge)

Mauss, M. (1924) *The Gift* (London: Routledge).

Mosse, D (2004) Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice *Development and Change* 35(4), pp. 639-671.

Ruwanpura, K. N. (2008) Temporality of Disasters: The Politics of Women's Livelihoods 'After' the 2004 Tsunami in Sri Lanka *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 29(3), pp. 325-340.

Ruwanpura, K. N. (2009) Putting Houses in Place: Rebuilding Communities in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka *Disasters – The Journal of Disaster Studies, Policy and Management* 33(3), pp. 436-456.

Silber, I. (1998) Modern Philanthropy: Reassessing the Viability of a Maussian Perspective in: W. James, N. Allen (eds.) *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute*, (New York: Berghahn) pp. 134-150.

Sahlins, M. (1972) *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine Press).

Simpson , E. and Corbridge, S. (2006) The Geography of Things that may become Memories: The 2001 Earthquake in Kachchh-Gujarat and the Politics of Rehabilitation in the Pre-Memorial era. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 96(3), pp. 566-585.

Simpson, E. and de Alwis, M. (2008) Remembering natural disaster: Politics and culture of memorials in Gujarat and Sri Lanka, *Anthropology Today*, 24 (4), pp. 6-12.

Spencer, J. (2007) *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Tennekoon, S. (1988) Rituals of Development: The Accelerated Mahaväli Development Program of Sri Lanka *American Ethnologist*, 15(2), pp. 294-310.

Tittmus, R. (1971) *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy* (New York: Pantheon Books).

Vandevelde, T (2000) Towards a Conceptual Map of Gift Practices, in: T. Vanvelde (ed) *Gifts and Interests*, (Belgium: Peeters), pp. 1-23.

Wilford, J. (2008) Out of Rubble: Natural Disasters and the Materiality of the House *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26, 647-662.